

# Nonconformist Church Records

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Catholicism was the main religion in England until 1534 when King Henry VIII severed all ties to the Pope in Rome, and then began the Church of England. Those who did chose not to conform to the beliefs and teachings of the Church of England were considered nonconformists. In spite of centuries of persecution they conducted their own ceremonies and kept their own records as much as allowed. Many of these nonconformist registers survive and are now available online.

## Timeline of Non-Conformity

### 1300s-1400s

- **1324-1385-** John Wyclif translates Bible into English; a spiritual revolution begins
- *The Renaissance*, new learning, new ideas

### 1500s-

- Reformers: Martin Luther, Huldrych Zwingli, John Calvin, John Knox, and others
- **1534-** England separated from the Catholic Church and established the Church of England in 1534.
- **1534-** Act of Supremacy. Englishmen owed their support to the Church of England.
- **1568-** Puritans split into the Separatists and the Presbyterians (established through teachings of John Calvin).
- **1581-** Independents/Congregationalists evolve from the Separatists.

### 1600s-

- **1612-** First Baptist Church was organized
- **1620-** Many nonconformists/ separatists leave for the New World on the Mayflower and other ships.
- **1642-1660-** England Civil War. Nonconformists enjoyed a large degree of religious freedom, still many emigrate.
- **1652-** Society of Friends or Quakers began by George Fox

- **1654-** Quaker records begin
- **1660-** Puritans were suppressed by Charles II.
- **1664-** Conventicle Act was passed. Prohibited nonconformists from building their own chapels or holding open air meetings in or near a town.
- **1672-** Declaration of Indulgence. Allowed Protestant nonconformists to apply for licenses for meeting houses and preaching.
- **1673-** Test Act passed. Designed to suppress nonconformists.
- **1688-** Baptists records began
- **1689-** Act of Toleration. Prior to this act it was compulsory to attend the Church of England services.
- **1695-1705-** Marriage Duty Act. Anglican clergy were required to register the births of any children in their parish who were not baptized. This included many nonconformists.
- Very few nonconformist registers survive in this time period.

### 1700s-

- **1711-1715-** The Occasional Conformity Bill was passed and later repealed. Protestant nonconformists running for public office had to partake of the Church of England sacrament once a year.

- **1735-** Wesleyan Methodists began with founders John Wesley and Charles Wesley
- **1738-** Welsh Calvinistic Methodists began
- **1754-1837-** all were required to marry in the Church of Wales with the exception of Quakers and Jews.
- **1778-** Catholics felt safer to keep records
- **1791-** More than 100,000 Wesleyan Methodists
- Many nonconformists registers survive

#### **1800s-**

- Nonconformity grows due to the Industrial Revolution. Fifty percent of those attending religious services were nonconformists.

- **1829-** Catholic Emancipation Act passed giving Catholics access to all political and civil rights.
- **1837-** Government birth, marriage, and death records begin. People can marry in their nonconformist chapels so long as a civil registrar is present.
- **1837-** Missionaries from the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints began proselytizing; to 1851, ~2% join the faith.
- **1837-** Nonconformist registers are to be submitted to the Public Record Office, Somerset House London.
- **1837-** Nonconformists birth, marriages, and deaths are recorded in both civil registration and all churches.
- Most nonconformists registers survive

## **HOW DO I KNOW IF MY ANCESTOR WAS A NON-CONFORMIST?**

- Family tradition
- A marriage record can be found in the Church of England but not a christening or burial record.
- An ancestor is not found in the Church of England records in the place where it is known they came from or resided.
- A civil registration marriage certificate indicates marriage in a nonconformist chapel.
- Ancestor has a Biblical name such as Abraham, Jeremiah, Rebekah, etc.
- Church monuments and tombstones bear ancestors' names, but baptisms and marriages are not in Church of England registers, prior to 1852.
- A marriage licence was recorded, purchased

## **NON-CONFORMIST REGISTERS ONLINE**

[www.familysearch.org](http://www.familysearch.org) - FamilySearch microfilmed many non-conformist registers. Indexes are available on FamilySearch.org with links to the images on microfilm at the Family History Library. FamilySearch contains two databases including non-conformist registers:

### **1. Wales Births and Christenings, 1538-1975:**

- Go to Search > click Records > click the map of England > click Wales. Search the 'Wales **Births and Christenings, 1538-1975**' for indexes to microfilm copies at the Family History Library. Included in this collection are the following:

- Extracted records from original parish registers
  - The **British Vital Records Index** which contained many non-conformist church indexes.
  - **Dr. Williams' Library**- A central birth registry for Independents, Baptists and Presbyterians. Most of the collection is available at [www.familysearch.org](http://www.familysearch.org) in the *England Births and Christenings, 1538-1975* database.
  - **The Wesleyan Methodist Metropolitan Registry**- A central birth registry for Methodists containing about 10,000 names from 1773-1838. Most of the collection is at available at [www.familysearch.org](http://www.familysearch.org) in the *England Births and Christenings, 1538-1975* database
2. **'England and Wales, Non-Conformist Record Indexes, 1588-1977' (RG4-8)**. A specific non-conformist registers database. Links to subscription images on BMDregisters.co.uk and FindMyPast.co.uk.

[www.findmypast.com](http://www.findmypast.com)- Findmypast is placing many digital images of the records of the Church of Wales and some Nonconformist registers online. When you search findmypast.com > go to **Search records** > click **A-Z of record sets**. In the Search box type **Wales** > Click **England & Wales Non-Conformist Births and Baptisms** or **Marriages** or **Burials**.

[www.bmdregisters.co.uk](http://www.bmdregisters.co.uk)- The official website for nonconformist church registers. Includes registers for Methodists, Wesleyans, Baptists, Independents, Protestant Dissenters, Congregationalists, Presbyterians, Unitarians, Society of Friends (Quakers), Dissenters and Russian Orthodox. Also includes overseas records and other miscellaneous records.

[www.thegenealogist.co.uk](http://www.thegenealogist.co.uk)- Subscription website that has access to the indexes and images of the non-conformist church registers on BMDRegisters.co.uk.

[www.ancestry.co.uk](http://www.ancestry.co.uk)- has some Nonconformist church registers online

## NON-CONFORMIST REGISTERS IN LIBRARIES, COUNTY RECORD OFFICES, AND LOCAL CHURCHES

### Registers at the Family History Library

Go to [www.familysearch.org](http://www.familysearch.org)

1. Go to **Search** > click **Catalog**
2. Next to the **Places** box enter the name of your ancestor's parish- i.e. 'England, Yorkshire, Thirsk' and then click **Search**.
3. Click the **Church records** link

4. The name of the religion will be shown next to the author. Click the link then record the film number to view at the Family History Library or order online at [films.familysearch.org](http://films.familysearch.org) and have it sent to a local FamilySearch Center.

The Family History Library may also have valuable county wide marriage indexes pre-1837. To access a marriage index for a specific county, follow steps 1-2 above then for step 3 only type the name of the country and county, i.e. 'Wales, Glamorganshire'. For Step 4 click the **Church records – Indexes** link and then record the microfilm or fiche number

#### ***National Index of Parish Registers-*** FHL 942 D27ste

A guide to Church of England, Roman Catholic, and other non-conformist church registers county-by-county. Shows what churches exist, years registers began, and their location.

#### **Registers at County Record Offices or local non-conformist chapels**

Records not turned into the General Register's Office may have been turned into local County Record Offices or remain in the local chapels themselves. The following is a link to information and websites for local County Record Offices throughout England and Wales.

<http://www.ancestor-search.info/CRO-INDEX.htm>

## **STRATEGIES FOR SEARCHING NON-CONFORMITY**

- Find what nonconformist denominations existed in an ancestor's Church of England parish by going to:
  - <http://www.british-history.ac.uk/topographical-dict/wales> > click the alphabetical grouping which covers the parish name; scroll down to the parish name alphabetically. Consider name spelling if not listed, substituting either/or "y" with "i". "ph" for "f", etc
  - National Index of Parish Registers- FHL 942 D27ste volume 13; at college/univ. libraries; major research libraries; Family History Library
  - Cardiganshire, Camarthenshire, and Pembrokeshire – see *The Parish Churches and Nonconformist Chapels of Wales* by Bert Rawlins; digital copy available online at FamilySearch's catalog; search by Title or Author.
- County directories, gazetteers, maps, histories, the 1851 religious census all may help you locate congregations.
- Nonconformists were required to marry in the Church of Wales from 1754-1837, and may have chosen to marry by license in order to avoid the marriage banns. Search for marriage bonds and allegations in the Diocese. Search FS Catalog under county name, under "Church Records".
- Nonconformist chapels could cover long distances. Search Church of Wales parish registers and all nonconformist chapel registers at least within 10 or so miles.

- Nonconformist ancestor's births and burials may have even been recorded up to as many as 20 miles away depending on where the nearest nonconformist chapel of their choice was located. This is particularly with Methodists & their Circuits.
- Reconstruct families by combining church records with other sources like probate, parish chest, court, tax, etc.
- Some children may be christened in the Church of Wales while siblings were baptized in nonconformist chapels.
- People were changing their religion back and forth. Search all nonconformist chapels in a given area if registers aren't found in the Church of Wales.
- Some nonconformists, like Baptists, did not believe in infant baptisms so they recorded the births instead. They and the Quakers had adult baptisms.
- Quakers did not believe in baptism so they only recorded births (and marriages).
- One generation may have been nonconformist while another the Church of Wales.
- Early LDS converts on average joined two other denominations before converting

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